

It's late April 2022 in Bologna and we meet in Franco's apartment. He shows me his collection of collages he produced in the Covid period, his art therapy to fight off depression. The paintings can be found here and there online, exhibited under the pseudonym Istubalz. We've come together to discuss his latest book *The Third Unconscious, The Psycho-sphere in the Viral Age* (published in English by [Verso](#), translated by Bifo himself into Italian). He wrapped up the manuscript during the Summer of 2021, midway into the Corona pandemic. Different from his 2020 diary, the book already attempts to frame the pandemic. There's hardly any time for reflection as we've moved into the next crisis.

Before I departed from Amsterdam our [Institute of Network Cultures](#) published the English translation of Franco's latest essay, [The Precipe](#), on Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Two months into the war, I am taking a break from the support campaign at home. With the support of Annaliza Pelizza, I took up a residency at Umberto Eco's former semiotics department. Afraid that a debate about foreign affairs, the depressing state of the EU and the role of the US and NATO may lead to a ritual exchange of banalities over the latest factoids and expose inevitable generational and regional differences, it turned out better to instead take a dive into the underlying mental conditions of our accelerating present.

The message of this short book is simple: we urgently need to engage with the future of psychoanalysis. The discovery of the unconscious in the 18th and 19th century resulted in the founding of psychoanalysis as both a therapy and tool for cultural analysis. Later, of course, it became an industry. In response to the emphasis of its founding fathers on denial and sublimation, the second mode of the unconscious, associated with Lacan and even more so Deleuze and Guattari, stressed the element of production. For them, the unconscious is not a theatre but a factory. Fifty years into the liberation of desire probe, Berardi proposes a next angle: a third unconscious that circles around an understanding of the social dimension of the mind, in a world that is no longer focused on growth and (schizo)productivity but on extinction and degrowth. Berardi calls for the development of new critical concepts that can help us to understand today's spectrum of emotional attention. We must practice "riding the dynamic of disaster," which he calls an accurate description of "our mental condition during the current earthquake, which is also a heart-quake and a mind-quake."

The seamless transition from Covid into the war in Ukraine reinstates the collapse of the bio-info-psycho circuit under the weight of the 'stack of crises' (my term), the succession of catastrophic events. There's a deeply unsettling and often profoundly depressing inevitably lurking about this atmosphere of accumulating disaster: the all too real sense that life is on the brink of total collapse and imminent disaster.

With his psychoanalytic intervention, Berardi has made a clever move, escaping the dull regulatory dead-end street into which Europe's marginal social media critique manoeuvred itself. Who's still using the internet, after all? With the contemporary art system becoming a woke stage, the old European white man is advised to step back. Refusing to stop thinking, over the past years Berardi no doubt had to cope with a strong fluctuation of moods himself. Readers can easily identify the mental disposition of the author. Luckily, *The Third Unconscious* proves the advantage of a certain distance on events. The medium of the long essay or book helps, in this respect. Berardi remains one of the few European intellectuals with such a phenomenal seismographic sensibility, in particular toward the dark states of the young minds, glued to their devices. Reading the pulse in this way, in tune with the world of youth, is something he shares with the late Bernard Stiegler.

For doom scrollers, tired of reading nostalgic statements such as analogue=potency versus digital=exhaustion, the activist Berardi offers a clear alternative: "It is based on liberation from the obsession with economic growth; it is based on the redistribution of resources, on the reduction of labour time, and on the expansion of time dedicated to the free activity of teaching, healing and taking care." To get there Berardi proposes a "psycho-cultural conversion to frugality and friendship." But before we can get there, it is crucial to work together on the correct diagnosis of the present.

Geert Lovink: *The Third Unconscious* is not a Covid diary. How do you look back at the past two years? It doesn't feel like it's over, despite history accelerating with Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Instead of orgasmic celebrations many seem reluctant and have internalized the regime of social distancing, quarantines, and lockdowns. Let's call this Mental Long Covid. How would you describe it?

Franco Berardi: We're in a situation that never ends, that is always feeding fear. What is lacking is the cathartic moment, the orgasm, the moment you start a new life. We long for the end but it is not coming. I have a friend, a

psychiatrist who suffers from long Covid in the medical sense, and she describes it as a condition of physical distress and weakness, the inability to move on. It is a state of permanent exhaustion.

GL: In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* Hannah Arendt states that the power of authoritarian rule is to create isolation and loneliness. Around the same time, in the early 1950s, David Riesman describes a similar phenomenon in *The Lonely Crowd*.

FB: In my book, I quote the famous words of a Canadian doctor that warned against sexual intercourse during the Covid period. At that moment I became aware of the transformation of proximity, meaning the relations of bodies in space, meaning the characterization of the body of the other as a sanitary danger. If you are seventy, like me, this may be an intellectual object of study, but when you're sixteen this may change your perception of the future. It may have a long-term traumatic effect—another manifestation of long Covid. There is a sharp increase in suicide among the young population, a rise of 39 percent in Italy.

GL: Cyberculture has prepared this condition over the past thirty years with virtual sex, online dating, telephone sex, and webcams, up to the metaverse. Sexual intercourse at a distance is an integral part of global culture.

FB: The pandemic years have not changed this direction, but rather manifest as a final acceleration of already existing psychological and economic tendencies. We've not experienced a paradigmatic shift. You can see this at the level of precarization and the virtualization of work and increased mental exploitation. Tragedies can help to change the course of history, but this has not happened.

GL: What is hyperconnected loneliness? This condition seems to be paradoxical. As Sherry Turkle's book title says: we are alone together. We are surrounded by so many others. The dominant platforms are called "social" media for a reason. But there is no space for reflection in solitude. Social media constantly disrupt you, even if you try.

FB: Over the past twenty years there has been a transfer of embodied social time into a disembodied empty time. Online you are socially engaged, you do not quit society, but you abandoned the possibility of meeting the body of the other. The year 2020 completed this process. Even before Covid, we experienced a culture of fatigue in the sense of regression and stagnation at

many levels. This sense of alienation was already perceived, in your work, mine, and others. The psychopathology of the hyperconnected world is well known.

In 2017 I was tired. I was sick as well and put on an automatic reply saying that I was sorry and that I was not able to check my email because of my fatigue. A friend responded that she was anxious that I was lost for the world, please don't do this, she wrote to me. You can say I am old, and a lost case, coming from the analogue era. However, when I am required to remember five different passwords and pin numbers to check my sanity situation, that's causing stress for everyone. These sorts of oppressive data regimes are draining our cognitive capacity. This is also part of Mental Long Covid.

The fall of 2019 was a significant period. We saw many protests, worldwide, from Santiago in Chile to Hong Kong. The widespread collective disaffection on a mass scale can be read as a sign that endemic exhaustion was no longer bearable for many. I witnessed many movements, from 1968 and 1977 to the anti-war protests in 2003 and Occupy in 2011. In 2019 I had the impression that the various protests diverged and lacked a common motive and language. At the level of subjectivity, they are contradictory. A political strategy is becoming impossible to find. In 2011 you had the movement of the squares, from Cairo and Damascus to Madrid: different circumstances but the same conceptual framework. I call it the convulsive moment.

GL: In the book, you make a call to forget our origins. Is this why you shy away from saying something about Black Lives Matter, Extinction Rebellion, and related Instagram-driven movements? Do you believe in the revolutionary potential of identity politics?

FB: Identity can sometimes be a tool to create solidarity. At the same time, it is a trap. Identity is a misunderstanding, also a philosophical concept. Identity means the construction or perception of difference concerning the other. My identity is different from yours. In this context, I prefer a concept from Simondon: not identity but the differentiation process that makes it possible for me to become an individual. This is what he calls individuation. If you think that the foundation of solidarity is identity, the next step is war. The identification of the nation in European history means war, and this is what we're currently witnessing in Ukraine.

GL: You go to Spain to attend the meeting of the psychoanalysis association

there. Also, you are part of a Latin seminar of psychoanalytic practitioners that meet on Zoom twice a week and work with the old friends of Guattari who are preparing a meeting for the fiftieth anniversary of *Anti-Oedipus*. What do you propose to them?

FB: I am reading Freud and Ferenczi again and have to admit: their writing is naive—for instance, Freud’s analysis of war neurosis. Even Ferenczi cannot understand what’s happening on the collective level of psychic suffering. This is beyond the horizon of psychoanalysis, even for Jung, who’s the only one that speaks of the collective unconscious. This indicates that we are on the brink of a significant scientific and philosophical discovery. This will neither come from cognitive psychology nor neuroscience. We need to locate it inside the realm of psychoanalysis. I do not believe neuroscience will take over. It understands 99 percent of what happens inside the brain in terms of distraction, decision making, and memory but what they overlook is the human sensibility. Human behavior is not a deterministic feature. Something is not explainable in terms of causality.

GL: Would that be the social? Your opening sentence states that you explore the ongoing mutation of the social Unconscious. I would add the techno-social ...

FB: I recently reread a book of Félix Guattari that I translated myself into Italian and that I know very well, *Le Capitalisme Mondial Intégré*, as he is one of the few thinkers to see the relation between the unconscious and technology. Guattari is not doing this from the nostalgic humanist perspective. On the contrary. He speaks about the potential of the machinic unconscious. I ask: what is the spatial character of the social today? My current obsession is with the inability of psychoanalysis to deal with the current techno-social unconscious. The seminar I participate in looks at this from a Latin perspective, which may be different from an Anglo-Saxon or a Chinese one. Marx and Darwin are part of our toolbox to understand the present, but Freud is no longer in the mix.

GL: Is this because the Freudian perspective got compromised by marketing? We’re aware that we can be influenced in subliminal ways, we know our sexual drives, many young readers would think.

FB: Psychology has become an integral part of capitalist consumerism. But beware: that doesn’t mean that psyche is no longer relevant. On the contrary. The psychoanalytic perspective is the most crucial now but it is

missing. We badly need a psychoanalytic understanding of the present, more than an economic one. The social production of loneliness, competitive behavior, and aggression are as real as economic exploitation.

GL: As a member of the Guattari circle, back in the seventies in Paris, how do you look at the “Werdegang” or demise of the second unconscious?

FB: That’s the neoliberal unconscious as described by Massimo Recalcati in his 2010 book *The Man Without an Unconscious*—a subject without a deep well of unconscious desire, obsessed with immediate enjoyment. No more delayed gratification. In this system, the unconscious has been externalized and exploded in the social imagination. Without realizing it, the authors of the 1972 *Anti-Oedipus* sketch out the genesis of the neoliberal unconscious. They speak of the explosion of the unconscious as a happy process of liberation—which is legitimate. But the reality is the implosion of it. If you want to understand this, read Michel Foucault’s 1979 seminar *La Naissance de la biopolitique*. Several years later Foucault was indeed able to articulate this mechanism. He understands the mental aspect of the Thatcher moment. Covid has exposed the impossibility to continue with the second unconscious, which is dead, but we are living inside the dead corpse. We’re still living under the threat of economic growth, liberation, etc., while stagnation is our daily reality.

GL: How would you describe the current culture of fear and anger, of resignation and stagnation? In your book, you pair concepts such as extinction and exhaustion with impotence.

FB: Now you are entering the realm of the unknown that urgently needs to be studied. We don’t know what’s going to happen and don’t know what should be done to escape the current crisis. We must go deep at this moment of catastrophe. Is there a therapy or a political strategy to overcome the current depression?

GL: After studying and describing one particular form of the techno-social mental condition, namely sadness as the twenty-first-century manifestation of melancholia, I came to the conclusion that the description alone is not sufficient. Sadness, by design, is going nowhere. The recognition as such does not lead us to a political strategy. At best, we get a deeper understanding of the current stagnation.

FB: In your new book *Stuck on the Platform* you are not proposing sadness

as a way out. However, what we can say is that, for instance, Putin is a product of a long-lasting depression, on the verge of collapse, which at this stage means taking that jump out of the window. At this very moment in time we are at the point of suicide. How do we get out of this situation? My intuition tells me that depression is the therapy for depression. We should go the homeopathic way. The depressed persona today is the one who understands reality best and does not experience a desire or see a future in his or her own life. It is the only person who can tell the truth to him or herself. We should validate this position and see it as a starting point in political terms.

Here I come to my keyword for 2022: resignation. In Christian terminology, resignation means the acceptance of the will of God. You must accept and resign and not refuse. If you do not trust God and do not believe, like me, even if you count the bishop of Bologna among your friends, like me, what is the meaning of resignation for us atheists? It means abandoning the expectations we had. Let's abandon the idea that the future will be expensive. Forget the equitation of larger being better. That's over. You remember Schumacher's *Small Is Beautiful*, which meant that on a small level we could find better ways to expand. No, that's really over.

The intellectual, mental, and cognitive resources of the planet are exhausted, even in China, where we witness a significant movement to abandon work due to mental but also procreation exhaustion. Think of the hikikomori phenomenon in Japan of young hermits that have totally withdrawn from society. When a Japanese friend visited me in 2008 and told me about the one million hikikomori, I felt bad for them, how horrible, and he told me he had not left his room for six months until he discovered the *autonomia* concept and understood the affinity of the autonomous stance with his condition. Try to take the Tokyo subway. Try to work in an office in Tokyo. This is when I started to think about the paradox of depression in our time. When the social becomes so competitive, so repressive, better to close off and go for loneliness as the better option. No more human beings, I want to be alone. Monastic life gets a new meaning.

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